THE TEXAS ORATOR
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VOX POPULI

Jan 30

The Misunderstood Implications of the Electoral College

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On January 7th, 2018, President Trump became the first president in a quarter of a century to deliver a speech to the American Farm Bureau Convention in Nashville, Tennessee. There, President Trump promoted his administration's economic policies, claiming they would correct, "Years of crushing taxes, crippling regulations, and corrupt politics which left our communities hurting, our economy stagnant, and millions of hardworking Americans completely forgotten."

While it remains to be seen if the administration can enact lasting economic change in America's rural communities, Donald Trump's appeal to the economically "forgotten" rural American was a vital part of his success in the 2016 presidential election. Donald Trump trailed Clinton by nearly 2.9 million votes, but his landslide near two-to-one victory in rural and small-town America launched him into the presidency. For the fifth time in history, and the second in living memory, the Electoral College system allowed a candidate to win the office without winning the popular vote.

Indeed, the Electoral College is unfair in the way it allocates political power. A single electoral vote in Wyoming represents the will of 195,000 citizens of voting age, whereas a single electoral vote in California represents 712,000 citizens. In effect, a voter in the country's least populous state has 3.6 times more voting power than a voter in the country's most populous state. Thus, the prevailing argument for the termination of

the Electoral College is that it allows rural areas to overpower the will of the urban majority, in effect becoming a "Tyranny of the Minority."

The issue with this perception of the Electoral College lies in its assumption that rural and urban interests are inherently opposed. I believe a clearly defined urban versus rural political conflict is a rare occurrence. While American history has seen a long-standing conflict between the largely rural South and urbanized North, this is a sectional divide, not a national metropolitan versus rural political divide. These conflicts appear in our political history as sporadic flare-ups rather than as a defining feature of American politics.

Urban and rural areas do possess unique cultural identities and societal values, but these differences alone do not define national elections. The sudden escalations of division are a response to severe disparity in economic development between urban and rural areas caused by periods of rapid economic restructuring. Thus, these flare-ups follow key moments in the country's transition from an agricultural to industrial economy and, most recently, from an industrial to service and "knowledge-based" economy.

The first instance of this American political reality occurred shortly after the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. In a country dominated by agriculture, federal intervention was needed to develop budding American industry. Beginning with the Tariff Act of 1789, Congress passed several protective tariffs on foreign manufactured goods, designed to help American industry get on its feet. American farmers stood in firm opposition to a protectionist trade policy, which caused higher prices on consumer goods and lowered the demand for American agricultural products abroad. This gave rise to the first political party system in America, and the famous ideological debate between Jeffersonian Republicanism and Hamiltonian Federalism.

Nevertheless, the first political party system would not last, and after the War of 1812 revealed the United States' over-reliance on agricultural exports, the Democratic-Republican Party changed its position on tariffs and the Federalist Party quickly dissolved into its ranks. Even Jefferson himself changed his opinion, stating, "I have not formerly been an advocate for great manufactories… But other considerations entering into the question have settled my doubts."

In the years following the end of the first party system, commonly hailed as the "Era of Good Feelings," American politics were defined by a careful balancing of rural and urban interests. Henry Clay, known for his ability to craft legislative compromise, oversaw the creation of the "American System," a federal economic platform aimed at simultaneously promoting both rural and urban growth. One of its principle features was the use of tariff revenue to finance infrastructure, thereby rapidly expanding internal trade. Increased economic inter-connectivity between the countryside and cities allowed the country to consolidate

commercially, and, for most of the 19th century, political conflict was defined by regional divisions, rather than a national urban/rural split.

It wasn't until the turn of the century, when the effects of the industrial revolution were in full swing, and the American frontier had finally been closed, that rural interests again became a prominent force in American politics. The People's Party, also known as the Populist Party, rose up as the political voice for farmers faced by a growing rural debt crisis stemming from federal policies which supported high interest rates and did little to prevent the development of monopolies. During the late 1800s, railroad magnates controlled the primary mode of transport for goods across the country. Due to a lack of competition, these railroad companies were able to fix prices and charged farmers enormous sums to transport their products to urban markets. The presidential election of 1892 proved the People's Party was a regional force in the rural Midwest, where the party's nominee took a total of 22 electoral votes. However, to become competitive in national elections, the party allied itself with labor unions, and together they took up the cause of the working class nationwide. The party eventually fused with the Democratic Party on a national level and performed well in the elections of 1896 and 1900. Despite coming up short of the presidency, the movement paved the way for significant antitrust legislation and labor reform, such as the Sherman Antitrust Act and the Mann-Elkins Act, which benefitted working class Americans across the country.

Even as the country rapidly urbanized, rural America did not see its economic prospects decline. Despite the fading influence of agriculture, widespread rural industrialization in the interwar and postwar years brought unforeseen prosperity to rural America. Policies which promoted the growth of manufacturing were championed on the state and national level and became a pillar of the American economy through most of the twentieth century. A rural Arkansas newspaper reflected on the importance of manufacturing in a 1954 article claiming, "It is the dream and ambition of every small town to become an industrial center. Practically every chamber of commerce has an industrial committee . . . looking for new industry and new payrolls. Go into practically any town and ask the first man you see what his town needs most and chances are that he will say "more industry." In effect, rural voters were as invested in the industrial economy as their urban counterparts, and American politics reflected this unity of economic interest.

However, by the early 1980s, America's steady process of deindustrialization was visibly underway. While cities adapted quickly to the flight of American industry, rural areas struggled to transition to a service and information technology based economy. The influence of labor unions declined as manufacturing jobs left, and rural voters increasingly turned toward the deregulatory policies of the Republican Party to encourage growth. This political realignment was an act of economic necessity rather than evidence of a fundamental rural Republican/urban Democratic split. Furthermore, widespread rural commitment to the Republican

party was not unconditional. In the 1996 presidential election, Bill Clinton carried the vote in non-metropolitan America following a brief upsurge in rural manufacturing.

Nevertheless, the partisan divide strengthened in the 2000s, a decade which was marked by a 35-percent decrease in non-metropolitan manufacturing. In the post-Recession era, cities have posted job growth at twice the rate of rural areas. Meanwhile, non-metro employment is still below pre-Recession levels. The economic disparity between America's rural and urban communities is perhaps the country's most prominent, yet overlooked, example of wealth inequality.

Thus, the Electoral College should not be viewed as an institution promoting a supposed "Tyranny of the Minority." Rural voters have been accustomed to reconciling economic and cultural differences with metropolitan areas in the name of shared prosperity. It is only when the American economic system becomes no longer mutually beneficial that rural voters tend to exert their political influence to bring balance back to the system. The 2016 presidential election was the "forgotten American's" rational political response to the widening economic divide between rural and urban society — a divide that must be bridged before it pulls American society further apart.

U.S.

U.S., electoral college, urban, rural

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